

International Yearbook for Hermeneutics

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# International Yearbook for Hermeneutics

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## Contents

*Focus: Philosophy as Literature*  
*Schwerpunkt: Philosophie als Literatur*

RODOLPHE GASCHÉ (University of Buffalo) The Eve of Philosophy. On “Tropic” Movements and Syntactic Resistance in Derrida’s <i>White Mythology</i> . . . . .	1
GÜNTER FIGAL (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg) Schriftliches Denken. Über den literarischen Charakter der Philosophie . . . . .	23
BERNHARD ZIMMERMANN (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg) Platons Theorietheater. Einige Gedanken zum <i>Symposion</i> . . . . .	34
THOMAS JÜRGASCH (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg) „Dichtung als Wahrheit? Wahrheit als Dichtung?“. Philosophisches und Poetisches in der <i>Vita Plotini</i> des Porphyrios . . .	48
SANEM YAZICIOĞLU (Istanbul University) The Mist of Seeing . . . . .	73
JENNIFER MENSCH (The Pennsylvania State University) The Poem as Plant. Archetype and Metamorphosis in Goethe and Schlegel . . . . .	85
PETER GEORGSSON (Gothenburg University) Filling in Nietzsche. The Hermeneutical Reversal of Plato’s Indeterminacy Arguments and its Relevance for the Understanding of Philosophical Texts . . . . .	107
THEODORE GEORGE (Texas A&M University) The Promise of World Literature . . . . .	128

JEROME VEITH (Seattle University)	
Waves and Horizons. Literary Response in the Space of Questionability . . . . .	144
GERT-JAN VAN DER HEIDEN (Radboud University Nijmegen)	
Who Bears Witness for the Witness? On the Testimony of Literature . . . . .	160

*Articles / Beiträge*

TANI TÔRU (Ritsumeikan Universität, Kyôto)	
Die Phänomenalisierung der Kultur . . . . .	175
HANS PETER LIEDERBACH (Kwansei Gakuin Universität, Nishinomiya)	
Übersetzungs-Räume. Zur hermeneutischen Konstellation von Martin Heidegger und Watsuji Tetsurô . . . . .	187
ITÔ TÔRU (Kyôto Institut für Technologie)	
Yanagi Muneyoshi. Eine Kunsttheorie im technischen Zeitalter . . . .	208
CHARLOTTE GAUVRY (Université de Liège)	
Kategorie und Formbegriff. Von Lask zu Heidegger . . . . .	225
INGA RÖMER (Bergische Universität Wuppertal)	
Ricœurs Spätphilosophie als ein post-hegelianischer Kantianismus . .	249
Authors . . . . .	269
Index of Names . . . . .	271
Subject Index . . . . .	273

# Who Bears Witness for the Witness?

## On the Testimony of Literature

by

GERT-JAN VAN DER HEIDEN (Radboud University Nijmegen)

Literature can be read in different ways and for different reasons. In his essay *Demeure*, which is concerned with Maurice Blanchot's intriguing short story *L'instant de ma mort*, Derrida notes that this literary text can be read, as for instance historians might do, as an archive or a document; it can also be read as a symptom, or as a work of literary fiction. Yet this enumeration starts with the possibility of this work of fiction being read "comme une témoignage dit sérieux et authentique".<sup>1</sup> This latter way of reading, as the opening words of *Demeure* indicate, determines the course of Derrida's considerations: "*Fiction et témoignage*".<sup>2</sup>

By this specific orientation to testimony, Derrida inscribes his text *Demeure* into a much wider range of contemporary reflections on testimony, bearing witness and attestation – to *Zeugnis*, *Zeugen* and *Bezeugung*, as German has it, immediately showing the intrinsic connection between these terms. A brief list of philosophical works in which testimony, bearing witness, and attestation appear as crucial concepts may easily convince us of the importance of these themes for contemporary thought: Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, Lyotard's *Le différend*, Foucault's last lectures on *parrhesia*, Ricœur's *Soi-même comme un autre*, Derrida's reading of Maurice Blanchot in *Demeure* as well as of Paul Celan in *Politique et poétique du témoignage*, and Agamben's *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*.

Although it is probably too much to ask for one, fixed common core in these different reflections on testimony, bearing witness, and attestation, it is possible to point out at least two main lines of inquiry. First, these notions are used to rethink the nature of self-understanding, as Heidegger and Ricœur argue in their respective works. Second, these concepts are used to

<sup>1</sup> JACQUES DERRIDA, *Demeure*. Maurice Blanchot, Paris 1998, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> DERRIDA, *Demeure*, p. 9.

think what it means to be a witness and a survivor of a dreadful event in history as Lyotard's book as well as Agamben's show. Although these two lines of inquiry – self-understanding and survival in relation to the task of speaking for the other – are different, they nevertheless have many structural elements in common, and often they are inseparable. In this respect, Derrida's *Demeure* deserves special attention since it shows us how these two lines of inquiry are caught up in each other. Moreover, for a reflection on the theme of *philosophy as literature*, Derrida's text is significant since it addresses how the issue of testimony is intrinsically related to fiction and literature.

In what follows, I will start with Heidegger's notion of *Bezeugung* ("attestation") in order to discuss one way in which the problems of testimony, bearing witness and attestation enter the stage of contemporary thought. In addition, this allows me to address some of the questions and concerns Derrida raises with respect to Heidegger on this issue. To deepen and interpret these concerns, I will turn to Derrida's analysis of testimony, its relation to fiction and, finally, explore one crucial motive at work in Derrida's reading of Blanchot's *L'instant de ma mort* as well as his reading of Paul Celan's phrase "Niemand/zeugt für den/Zeugen".<sup>3</sup> The question related to this phrase and that intrigues Derrida here – 'Who bears witness for the (silent) witness?' or 'Who bears witness for the silence in witnessing?' has a twofold importance, as I hope to show towards the end of this essay: first, it goes to the heart of Derrida's concerns with respect to Heidegger; second, it offers an account of speaking for the other in terms of testimony; thus, it offers one of the keys to understand why, according to Derrida, literature and fiction are indispensable in a philosophical reflection on testimony.

## 1. Departing from Heidegger

The fundamental role of attestation (*Bezeugung*) in *Sein und Zeit* probably goes without saying. Attestation is the term Heidegger introduces to describe how *Dasein* calls itself to authenticity, with "etwas wie eine *fremde* Stimme"<sup>4</sup> that does not have any particular message to convey but still addresses *Dasein* in its everydayness. In attestation, *Dasein* bears witness to its authentic potentiality-of-being *to itself*. Heidegger uses the term attestation in order to stress that *Dasein*'s bearing witness is not about conveying knowledge or information; rather, it is performative in nature: By bearing

<sup>3</sup> PAUL CELAN, *Aschenglorie*, in: *ibid.*, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 2, ed. Beda Allemann / Stefan Reichert / Rudolf Büchner, Frankfurt am Main 1983, p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen 1967<sup>11</sup>, p. 277.



witness to itself, the possibility of an authentic mode of being is opened up for and made known to Dasein.<sup>5</sup> Correspondingly, the response to such a call is not the affirmation or negation of a certain proposition; rather, it places Dasein before a “choice” (*Wahl*) and asks of Dasein a certain *ethos* or “attitude” (*Haltung*) which, if Dasein indeed “wants-to-have-a-conscience” (*Gewissenhabenwollen*) and wants to be-a-self, is characterized as “*Entschlossenheit*”.<sup>6</sup>

The relation of attestation to making known and giving to understand immediately shows the hermeneutic nature of attestation; this is affirmed by a beautiful quote from the essay “Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung”, where Heidegger connects *Bezeugung* and *Zeugen* to *Bekunden*. Recall that he often looks for the basic meaning of the term “hermeneutics” in a terminology around *Kunde*, such as *Kundgeben* and *Kunde bringen*. *Bekunden*, or “to testify”, is part of this family of words. Heidegger writes:

Wer ist der Mensch? Jener, der zeugen muß, was er sei. Zeugen bedeutet einmal ein Bekunden; aber zugleich meint es: für das Bekundete in der Bekundung eintreten. Der Mensch ist *der*, der er *ist*, eben in der Bezeugung des eigenen Daseins. Diese Bezeugung meint hier nicht einen nachträglichen und beiherlaufenden Ausdruck des Menschen, sondern sie macht das Dasein des Menschen mit aus.<sup>7</sup>

The human being must bear witness to what he is. In fact, bearing witness or attestation of his own existence is the very mode of being of humans. In this quote, Heidegger affirms that attestation is not concerned with epistemological problems, as if our potentiality-of-being could be secured or guaranteed by a proof or an argument. Rather, bearing witness and attestation themselves are the only *guarantee* that Dasein has of its potentiality-of-being. Therefore, Heidegger emphasizes in this quote how the act of bearing witness and attestation implies and requires a certain attitude, as is stated most clearly in the third sentence of the quote: to bear witness also means to “be answerable for” (*einstehen für*) what one has testified. Hence, in attestation and bearing witness the *Bekundung*, the making known by testifying, cannot be separated from the *Einstehen für*, i.e., from the specific attitude by which the human himself becomes answerable for and the guarantee of his own testimony. In this sense, by connecting *Bekunden* and *Einstehen für*, this quote repeats the basic gesture of *Sein und Zeit* in which *Bezeugung* is the emphatic word Heidegger uses to articulate the inseparability of mak-

<sup>5</sup> Cf. HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 271: “‘Stimme’ ist aufgefasst als das Zu-Verstehen-Geben.”

<sup>6</sup> HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit*, pp. 269–270.

<sup>7</sup> MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Erläuterungen zur Hölderlins Dichtung*, Gesamtausgabe 4, Frankfurt am Main 1981, p. 36.

ing known or giving to understand and wanting-to-have-a-conscience, i. e., ultimately, the inseparability of *Erschlossenheit* and *Entschlossenheit*.

If we consider contemporary reflections on attestation, bearing witness and testimony, this double dimension of “making known” and “being answerable for ...” often returns. Testimony is a form of announcement that engages the speaker in a specific way: in addition to the testimony’s specific content, the witness always also says, implicitly or explicitly, “I will answer for what I said; I will vouch for it.”

Nevertheless, although Heidegger’s conception of *Bezeugung* may have set the agenda, concerns can be raised with respect to his analysis. Therefore, let me conclude this brief discussion of *Bezeugung* with two remarks preparing my discussion of Derrida’s *Demeure*.

(1) The first remark concerns the status of the text or the language by which Heidegger addresses the issue of *Bezeugung*. Neither his reflections in *Sein und Zeit* nor his comments in “Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung” are themselves attestations in the pertinent sense of *Bezeugung*. Nevertheless, as Derrida suggests, one might argue that this text itself does have the structure of a testimony or of bearing witness. Not only does it disclose and announce the structure of attestation at the heart of *Dasein*’s being, but it also seems to present this structure as a testimony that cannot be reduced to external arguments, proofs or principles; and, instead, it offers itself as its own guarantee. As Derrida puts it:

Le *Dasein* doit pouvoir témoigner de lui-même, voilà, dans *Sein und Zeit*, l’axiome ou le témoignage de l’analytique existentielle du *Dasein*. Dès le début, Heidegger annonce la mise en lumière, la monstration, la présentation (*Aufweis*) phénoménologique d’un tel témoignage (*der phänomenologische Aufweis einer solcher Bezeugung*), à savoir la phénoménologie d’une expérience qui est elle-même phénoménologique, c’est-à-dire consistant en une *présentation*. C’est la présentation d’une présentation, le témoignage sur un témoignage : il y a là du témoin pour le témoin, du témoignage pour le témoignage.<sup>8</sup>

What intrigues me in this comment is the transition from presentation to testimony – a transition that is passed over by Derrida without any comment and that is also reflected in the conjunction of axiom and testimony at the beginning of the quote. To see how odd this latter conjunction is, recall that a testimony has the speaker who utters it as its “proof” or guarantee; hence a testimony is not clear out of itself; an axiom, on the other hand, is that which is clear and evident out of itself. The reference to presentation may be read in light of Derrida’s reservation with respect to all phenomenology as a thought privileging presentation and the present. Moreover, the parallel he draws between the presentation of presentation and the tes-

<sup>8</sup> JACQUES DERRIDA, Poétique et politique du témoignage, in: *Herne* 83 (2004), pp. 521–539, here p. 530.

timony of testimony, suggests that the first is as problematic as the second. Indeed, this suggestion is corroborated by the following sentence in which he writes “il y a là du témoin pour le témoin”. One needs to be aware that this sentence appears in an essay in which Paul Celan’s phrase “Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugen” guides the whole rhythm of the text.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, if we read Derrida’s comment in this way, by emphasizing the analogous status of presentation and testimony and by reading testimony in light of a certain primacy of presentation in phenomenology – a reading which is, let us not forget, invited by Derrida’s text – we deprive ourselves of *another* reading, namely a reading in which testimony is not subsumed under or considered as an analogy of presentation, but rather a reading in which attestation (as well as the testimony of the text itself) is a moment in which Heidegger himself problematizes or displaces the value and meaning of phenomenology and presentation. I think this latter reading is more in line with what we saw earlier in our own discussion of Heidegger’s text, namely that attestation is not only about disclosure but connects disclosure to the problem of the witness who becomes answerable for his or her testimony and who becomes him or herself the guarantee of this testimony.

(2) These latter considerations bring me to a second remark. The tendency in Derrida’s quote to equate testimony and presentation in Heidegger’s text goes hand in hand with a continual rethinking of testimony and attestation in which he exactly addresses the nature and the intrinsic difficulty of the type of guarantee implied in bearing witness and, more precisely, the specific uncertainty of this type of guarantee. To try to capture this under one heading and to relate it immediately to Derrida’s other readings of Heidegger, note that although Heidegger addresses the specific attitude of *Einstehen für* and *Entschlossenheit* in his account of attestation, he does not discuss another typical aspect of every testimony and all bearing witness. A witness is only accepted as such if he or she is considered to be *trustworthy*. Any witness, as Derrida often emphasizes, always appeals to the trust of the addressee: whatever the witness says, he or she also, albeit perhaps implicitly, says: “Believe me and believe that what I say is true!” Heidegger neglects this particular dimension of belief, faith and trust, as Derrida argues.<sup>10</sup>

I hope that my previous comments indicate how I assess this critique of Derrida. On the one hand, Derrida might be too quick in drawing a parallel between presentation and testimony. In fact, Heidegger’s attention to

<sup>9</sup> In particular, it is mentioned immediately after the quotation above, cf. DERRIDA, *Poétique et politique du témoignage*, p. 530.

<sup>10</sup> Cf., e.g., JACQUES DERRIDA, *Foi et savoir*, Points, Paris 2001, pp. 90–91; and DERRIDA, *Poétique et politique du témoignage*, p. 532.

the necessity of the human to be answerable for his or her testimony brings him quite close to the problematic of faith, belief, and trustworthiness: the witness is him or herself the only guarantee of what is said – and one would be tempted to supplement Heidegger's explicit comments immediately with the remark that this guarantee that the witness him or herself is, indeed depends on nothing else than the trustworthiness of the testimony for which the witness has to answer. Yet, on the other hand, Derrida is right that Heidegger does not seem to offer such a supplement – at least not explicitly. There might be different reasons for this.<sup>11</sup> Yet, to phrase this in terms of Derrida's concerns, as long as it is *taken for granted* – as an axiom or as a testimony – that attestation *is possible*, that is to say, *as long as there is a witness for the witness*, and “a testimony for or about a testimony”, and as long as this witness and testimony are taken for granted, the question of trust, belief and faith will not enter the picture. However, what if this witness for the witness is not believed? What if we take the possibility seriously that this witness for the witness is offering a false testimony? Or, what if attestation is *impossible*? Is it possible to testify to or for such an impossibility? These questions, as I will show in the second part of my paper, guide Derrida's reflections on testimony; therefore, let us turn to Derrida's systematic reflection on testimony in his text *Demeure*.

## 2. Derrida and the Double Bind of Fiction and Testimony

I will address *Demeure* along three lines: (a) First, an exposition of Derrida's account of testimony in light of the problem of trust and belief. (b) Second, a discussion of how this problematic relates testimony to literature. (c) Third, re-examine this problematic in light of the question of who bears witness for the witness and there I will turn to *L'instant de ma mort*, the text by Blanchot that orients Derrida's *Demeure*.

(a) *The Aporias of Testimony*. As in his discussion of other phenomena, Derrida is very attentive to the systematic aporia or tension that exists between the singularity and uniqueness presupposed in every testimony, on

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, one might consider the fact that the attestation of Dasein is not only addressed *to* Dasein, but also given *by* Dasein, so the crucial difference between the witness and the addressee on which Derrida insists seems to dissolve in Heidegger's version of attestation. Nevertheless, Heidegger does mention that Dasein, the listener, is Dasein in its everyday existence and that the call of conscience, calling Dasein to an authentic existence is “etwas wie eine *fremde* Stimme”. “Yet, on exactly on ein on weg? this point, one may wonder why the problem of belief and trust is not addressed. If it is indeed an alien voice, why would or should Dasein in its everyday existence trust this voice?”

the one hand, and the repetition, generality or universality, on the other hand. Let us say, to prepare what will follow later, that testimony is located at the point of intersection of what is unshareable and what can be shared. On the one hand, the witness is singular because he witnessed an event to which others – and in particular the ones who need his testimony – were not present. To experience or to be present at a certain event makes the witness unique and irreplaceable. As Derrida notes, already playing with the idea of ‘the witness for the witness’ the addressee might be called a witness of the witness since the addressee is the one who witnesses how the first witness bears witness. However, as Derrida writes: “Ce non-accès direct ou immédiat du destinataire à l’objet du témoignage, c’est ce qui marque l’absence de ce ‘témoin du témoin’ à la chose même.”<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the addressees depend on the witness’s testimony to have access to the event. Therefore, testimony is indispensable and irreducible to proof. On the other hand, bearing witness means to make this private experience public. Thus, bearing witness also implies repetition and generality in a number of senses. Let me mention only two of these senses. First, the witness presupposes and *trusts* that he shares a language with the addressees so that they can indeed understand his testimony and that he can give to understand his testimony to them.<sup>13</sup> Second, at the moment of bearing witness and making his experiences public, the witness is no longer present at the event of which he testifies. As Derrida puts it in his typical idiom:

Il n’est plus présent, maintenant, à ce à quoi il dit avoir été présent, à ce qu’il dit avoir perçu; même s’il dit être présent, présentement présent, ici maintenant, parce qu’on appelle la mémoire, la mémoire articulée à un langage, à son avoir-été présent.<sup>14</sup>

This manifold double bind of singularity and repetition has important consequences. Because the addressee is always excluded from any direct access to the event, the witness *can never prove* his testimony. Due to this lack of a rigorous proof, or perhaps I should say “as a counterpart of this lack of rigorous proof”, the witness himself becomes answerable for the truth of his testimony, as we already saw in our discussion of Heidegger. This particular characteristic of testimony involves at least the following three closely connected elements.

First, to be a guarantor for a testimony implies that, although the witness bears witness here and now, in the present, he commits himself to repeat this testimony in the future and to hold on to it. As Derrida writes: “Quand je m’engage à dire la vérité, je m’engage à répéter la même chose, un instant

<sup>12</sup> DERRIDA, *Poétique et politique du témoignage*, p. 527.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. DERRIDA, *Demeure*, pp. 37–39.

<sup>14</sup> DERRIDA, *Poétique et politique du témoignage*, p. 528.

après, deux instants après, le lendemain et pour l'éternité, d'une certaine manière."<sup>15</sup>

Second, a testimony is a performative event in which the witness puts himself at stake. Of course, a testimony usually has a certain content; yet, bearing witness "ne se réduit pas essentiellement [ ] à une relation narrative ou descriptive".<sup>16</sup> To show this as emphatically as possible, Derrida refers to the example of martyrdom in which the witness puts his own life at stake for his testimony:

Le martyr, quand il témoigne, il ne raconte pas d'histoire, il s'offre. Il témoigne de sa foi en s'offrant ou en offrant sa vie ou son corps, et cet acte de témoignage n'est pas seulement un engagement, mais sa passion ne renvoie à rien d'autre qu'à son moment présent.<sup>17</sup>

Third, as Derrida writes, "le témoignage prétend toujours témoigner en vérité de la vérité, pour la vérité".<sup>18</sup> The witness presents himself as being engaged in telling the truth. Aside from the particular content of the testimony, the witness also makes a particular appeal addressed to the listeners, namely, "*vous devez me croire, parce que je m'engage à vous dire la vérité*".<sup>19</sup> The addressee is asked to believe and, in turn, the witness has to appear as trustworthy to the addressee. This act of belief is necessary because the witness's claim to truth is without proof. Derrida insists on the distinction between testimony and scientific forms of knowing and the demonstration that the latter involves.<sup>20</sup> He insists on this difference because in the case of a demonstration, the listener has their own access to the demonstration – he or she has access to exactly the same lines of argument and the same material as the mathematician or the physicist – whereas in the case of testimony, the testified event or occurrence is *not* accessible to the addressees.

The first two elements I mentioned are also concerned with this third element since they may contribute to the trustworthiness of a witness: somebody who is not capable of holding on to his testimony will quickly appear as a witness who does not deserve to be believed, and somebody who is willing to put his life at stake for his testimony will appear as somebody who is steadfast and resolute in his convictions.

(b) *The Appeal to Believe and Literature*. Due to testimony's claim to truth, testimony requires the exclusion of any contamination by fiction, as Derrida argues in *Demeure*:

<sup>15</sup> DERRIDA, *Demeure*, pp. 36–37.

<sup>16</sup> DERRIDA, *Demeure*, p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> DERRIDA, *Demeure*, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> DERRIDA, *Demeure*, p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> DERRIDA, *Poétique et politique du témoignage*, p. 527. (Derrida, SiQ, 76.) Was ist das?

<sup>20</sup> Cf. DERRIDA, *Poétique et politique du témoignage*, p. 528.

Dans notre tradition juridique européenne, un témoignage devrait rester étranger à la littérature et surtout, dans la littérature, à ce qui se donne comme fiction, simulation ou simulacre, et qui n'est pas toute la littérature. Un témoin témoignante [ ], il fait appel à la foi de l'autre en s'engageant à dire la vérité, aucun juge n'acceptera qu'il se décharge ironiquement de sa responsabilité en déclarant ou insinuant: ce que je vous dis là garde le statut d'une fiction littéraire.<sup>21</sup>

Although this prohibition does not seem to leave any room for literature and fiction in testimony, this prohibition is a symptom of an underlying possibility. Every testimony appeals to an act of faith and a basic trust in two ways, as I noted before. On the part of the listeners, of the tribunal of judges and jury members, testimony asks for an act of faith to trust and believe the one who bears witness; but it also requires a basic trust and belief on the part of the witness that the tribunal is capable of understanding the testimony. (Lyotard's *Le différend* is important because it problematizes and questions exactly this latter trust and belief.) This dependence on belief, trust and faith in testimony means also that no testimony can exclude the specter of false testimony or fiction. As Derrida writes:

Il n'est pas de témoignage qui n'implique structurellement en lui-même la possibilité de la fiction, du simulacre, de la dissimulation, du mensonge et du parjure – c'est-à-dire aussi de la littérature, de l'innocente ou perverse littérature qui joue innocemment à pervertir toutes ces distinctions. Si cette possibilité qu'il semble interdire était effectivement exclue, si le témoignage, dès lors, devenait preuve, information, certitude ou archive, il perdrait sa fonction de témoignage.<sup>22</sup>

Derrida continues this account in his own characteristic way and there we find some of the typical figures of thought that he uses throughout his (later) work, such as haunting, the undecidable, the parasite and the chance that is only given as a risk; he writes:

Pour rester témoignage, il doit donc se laisser hanter. Il doit se laisser parasiter par cela même qu'il exclut de son for intérieur, la *possibilité*, au moins, de la littérature. C'est sur cette limite indécidable que nous allons essayer de demeurer. Cette limite est une chance et une menace, la ressource à la fois du témoignage et de la fiction littéraire [...].<sup>23</sup>

Here we get a first answer to the question of why Derrida, especially in his later readings of Heidegger, often comes back to Heidegger's tendency to forget to think how notions such as faith, trust and belief affect his thought and, in particular, his understanding of attestation. By exploring the necessary appeal to belief and trust in every testimony, Derrida shows that the question "Is this testimony fiction, yes or no?" must remain unanswerable and undecidable in order for testimony to exist. This undecidability of

<sup>21</sup> DERRIDA, *Demeure*, pp. 30–31.

<sup>22</sup> DERRIDA, *Demeure*, p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> DERRIDA, *Demeure*, p. 31.

testimony threatens its claim to truth. Yet, as Derrida argues, there may be testimony, but only at the unavoidable and impassable risk of it being fiction or literature. The possibility or the chance of testimony is only given with the threat of literature and fiction.

(c) *Who Bears Witness for the Witness?* These considerations show, to put it in Derrida's own words, that testimony has a secret that needs to be kept secret in testimony. What needs to be kept secret in testimony is that the testimony might also be a fiction – that the witness is a false witness, that the witness's imagination has altered his memories involuntarily, that the witness has no longer access to what he witnessed. No witness who testifies to this possibility – and during his testimony adds a doubt to his “I know” by wondering “do I know it?” – will ever be taken seriously at witness. In a moment, we will see this problem return in Blanchot's *L'instant de ma mort*, the text on which *Demeure* is centered.

Let me indicate first which determination of the secret our previous analyses provide. The secret is that about which a testimony has to keep silent because it cannot say it. A secret is that which cannot be shared. As always when Derrida discusses faith, trust, and belief, these notions appear when we confront something that cannot be shared. In the case of testimony, this unshareable is concentrated in the uniqueness and irreplaceability of the witness's experience of an event. Although bearing witness is a way of making public, this uniqueness indicates that something in testimony remains unshareable and asks for trust and belief.

It is in relation to this dimension of the secret and the unshareable that literature offers a specific opportunity. Literature, according to Derrida, is not only a threat to testimony, it is also that which can bear witness to this secret, to that which remains silent in every testimony and what remains unshared in every making public of testimony proper. At precisely this point, Blanchot's *L'instant de ma mort* offers us an exemplary instance.

*L'instant de ma mort* is a fiction that presents itself as testimony.<sup>24</sup> In this short story, the author introduces a narrator who reports about an event that happened to a young man years ago: during the war, this young man was placed in front of a firing squad to be executed. However, at the moment he is about to be shot, the lieutenant is called away and the commander of the firing squad offers the young man an escape. In this story, the narrator tries to capture what this event meant for the young man. This young man, as story tells, experienced the moment of his own death but nevertheless

<sup>24</sup> Cf. DERRIDA, *Demeure*, p. 92: “La littérature sert de témoignage réel. La littérature affecte, par un surcroît de fiction, d'autres diraient de mensonge, de passer pour un témoignage réel et responsable sur la réalité historique – sans pourtant le signifier puisque c'est de la littérature et que le narrateur n'est pas l'auteur d'une autobiographie.”



survived it. When the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the narrator, although at first he depicts the young man as someone else, is the same man as the narrator; or more precisely, he is not the same man since he is separated from his younger self by this event in which the young man died and which the narrator survived. In this sense, the narrator is a witness of what happened to the young man, but at the same time an impossible witness because he has no longer access to what the young man experienced. These two I's that appear in the story are accompanied by a third I, as Derrida suggests, namely by Blanchot the author who experienced a similar event in June 1944.<sup>25</sup> He offers a testimony of this event, but he does so in the form of a fiction of testimony.

Thus, as Derrida suggests in *Demeure*, Blanchot bears witness to the impossibility of self-attestation when events occur in a life that so fundamentally change who one is that one no longer has access to one's younger self. The narrator is the survivor; the young man died. At moments, the story hints at the intrinsic problem of such a witness for the witness. Although the narrator begins his story with the words "Je me souviens d'un jeune homme",<sup>26</sup> this remembering is of a dubious nature and involves forgetting and doubt as well as imagination. At first, the strong beginning of "je me souviens" ("I remember") seems to be repeated in an even stronger way when the narrator says "je sais" ("I know") when describing the feelings of the young man and the impact the event had on him. However, this "je sais", which occurs at least twice in the story, is immediately duplicated. The first time, it is accompanied by doubt: "le sais-je" ("do I know it"); the second time it is counteracted by fiction – "je sais, j'imagine" ("I know, I imagine"), the narrator says.<sup>27</sup> This doubling in knowing and doubting as well as in knowing and imagining reflects the doubling of the young man and the narrator as well as the doubling of voices in story: when the first voice says "Je suis vivant", the second immediately responds: "Non, tu es mort."

These doublings mark the narrator as the witness who survives the event of the young man's death and these doublings complicate the possibility of a testimony, to quote Derrida, "dans lequel le témoin jure de dire la vérité, toute la vérité, rien que la vérité".<sup>28</sup> After all, how to trust the testimony of a witness who, at the moment of bearing witness, says "do I know it?"

<sup>25</sup> Cf. DERRIDA, *Demeure*, p. 93.

<sup>26</sup> MAURICE BLANCHOT, *L'instant de ma mort*, in: Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, *The Instant of my Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, Stanford 2000, pp. 2–11, here p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> BLANCHOT, *L'instant de ma mort*, p. 4, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> DERRIDA, *Demeure*, pp. 93–94.

or “I imagine”. In this sense, as Derrida is keen to point out, this fictional testimony bears witness to the fact that, in these cases, testimony and bearing witness in the strict sense of the word are *impossible*. This aligns with Blanchot’s concerns elsewhere. As Derrida notes, Blanchot has been very attentive to the “possibilité critique [ ] de témoigner de l’absence d’attestation, quand nous ressentons le devoir d’attester auprès de l’autre que l’attestation n’est pas possible”.<sup>29</sup> Exactly in this possibility of bearing witness to the absence of attestation, as Derrida indicates, Blanchot comes very close to the problem to which Celan’s phrase “Niemand/zeugt für den/Zeugen” hints.<sup>30</sup>

*L’instant de ma mort* shows what the testimony of literature might be, as we can see when we ask: who is the witness in this story? Strictly speaking, the young man is the real witness of the event. Although the narrator is the same man, the story attests to the impossibility of the narrator taking the place of the young man as a witness, even though he is the same person. The phrase “I know – do I know it” implies exactly this: the narrator can no longer take the place of the proper or the real witness. At the same time, as Derrida writes: “il témoigne pour un témoin, en un sens différent cette fois, à la place du témoin qu’il ne peut pas être pour cet autre témoin que fut le jeune homme, et pourtant lui-même.”<sup>31</sup> We find here a testimony that attests to the silence of the young man and testifies, in this sense, for the absence of attestation. This is no longer a proper testimony because it testifies to the impossibility of attestation in these circumstances – “do I know it”, “I imagine”.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

In the beginning of this essay, I suggested, first, that an exploration of the question “Who bears witness for the witness?” goes to the heart of Derrida’s concerns with respect to Heidegger’s concept of attestation and, second, that it offers an account of speaking for the other in terms of testimony. Let me conclude by showing where we stand with respect to these two suggestions.

First, behind the question of who bears witness for the witness, we indeed see a struggle with Heidegger concerning the *impossibility* of attestation. This contrast is confirmed by the figure, which Blanchot introduces

<sup>29</sup> DERRIDA, *Demeure*, p. 33.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. DERRIDA, *Demeure*, p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> DERRIDA, *Demeure*, p. 84.

in *L'instant de ma mort*: in opposition to Heidegger's account of attestation, which is also concerned with thinking the imminence of death, Blanchot portrays a man who survived his own death. Rather than a "giving to understand" ("Zu-Verstehen-geben") by the call of a silent voice that offers Dasein a possibility-for-being-a-whole, death is conceived here as an event that breaks life in two – the young man and what remains of him in the figure of the narrator. Rather than giving something to understand, the narrator bears witness to what remains when the moment of the voice and of giving to understand is suspended.

Second, and to explicate the previous sentence, if we describe the secret of testimony in terms of a silence at the heart of every witness and in terms of what remains unshareable, we see what Blanchot's story offers us. In *L'instant de ma mort*, the young man is the real witness, but he is also doomed to silence. What *remains* of him after his death is the narrator who survived. The narrator can still speak and give to understand, and he is closely related to the young man although he does not coincide with him. Thus, the narrator is portrayed as the one who bears witness for the real witness; he speaks for him who cannot speak; in this sense, he testifies for the absence of attestation. Such a testimony is always fictional, but not in the pejorative sense of this word; rather, in the sense of the narrator trying to voice the experiences of the young man – "I know – do I know it". It is here, perhaps, also that the issue of trust and belief appears in yet another form at the heart of testimony. Here, it is not only a question of whether the reader believes the narrator or whether the narrator trusts that we, the readers, can understand him, but it is also a question of whether the narrator believes and trusts himself in his own bearing witness because he is aware of the distance separating him from the real witness; he does not share fully in the experiences of the real witness; after all, he is what remains of the real witness. Perhaps this is also why *L'instant de ma mort* is capable in an exemplary fashion of testifying to the struggle that is kept silent in every normal testimony, since it threatens testimony's claim to truth: *L'instant de ma mort* testifies to the struggle between belief and disbelief, between trust and distrust, between testimony and fiction, when the narrator says "I know, I imagine".

Together with Lyotard's *Le différend* and Agamben's *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, Derrida addresses the theme of testimony in light of the question of who bears witness for those witnesses who lost their ability to speak or are not capable of making their voice heard.<sup>32</sup> In these analyses, we reach the limit of the concept of testimony and we are on the brink of what is

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. DERRIDA, Demeure, pp. 33–34.

kept silent and what remains unshareable. Exactly here, by reading Blanchot in close connection with Celan's "Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugen", Derrida's *Demeure* shows the power of literature and poetry to testify for the absence of attestation and to bear witness for those witnesses who remain silent.

## Summary

This essay explores the role of fiction in testimonial literature. More in particular, it examines how testimonial literature can be understood as bearing witness for the absence of testimony. It does so by first discussing the concepts of testimony, attestation and witness in the work of Heidegger. Subsequently, by bringing Derrida's critique of Heidegger into play, this essay shows how Derrida thinks these concepts and how he assesses the problematic and complicated relation between testimony and literature. This relation forms the basis for Derrida's reading of Blanchot's *L'instant de ma mort*. In this latter text, fiction and literature give shape to the possibility of attesting to the impossibility of testimony.

## Zusammenfassung

Dieses Essay untersucht die Rolle der Fiktion in der Zeugnisliteratur und, genauer, wie die Zeugnisliteratur als ein Zeuge für die Abwesenheit eines Zeugnisses verstanden werden kann. Erstens werden die Begriffe „Zeugnis“, „Bezeugung“ und „Zeuge“ im Werk Heideggers besprochen. Zweitens bringt dieses Essay Derridas Kritik an Heidegger ins Spiel und zeigt, wie Derrida diese Begriffe sowie das problematische und komplizierten Verhältnisse zwischen Zeugnis und Literatur versteht. Dieses Verhältnis motiviert Derridas Lektüre von Blanchots *L'instant de ma mort*. In diesem letzten Text gestalten Fiktion und Literatur die Möglichkeit, die Unmöglichkeit des Zeugnisses zu bezeugen.